

Weekend long reads

Visual Arts

Istanbul Biennial: eco-warriors outdone by dissidents

While a glut of artists tackle climate change, work elsewhere in the city dares to confront Turkey's political regime directly



Still from the video 'Suspended' by Iz Oztat and Ann Antidote (2019)

Rachel Spence YESTERDAY

Turkey is tough for artists. The government crackdown on expression, which was catalysed by the Gezi Park protests of 2013 and intensified after the failed coup in 2016, has seen visual artists incarcerated and driven into exile alongside journalists, academics and writers. Among their number are the painter Zehra Dogan, freed earlier this year, and artist and teacher Fatos Irwen, who is still in jail.

Given the threats, you can't blame Turkey's art world for protecting itself. But in Istanbul last week civil liberty was the elephant in the room. The most important week in the city's art calendar, it saw the opening of the 16th Istanbul Biennial, the Contemporary Istanbul fair and the launch of a new permanent contemporary art centre, Arter.

The Biennial, managed by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), walks a careful line between complicity and resistance. The IKS's chief sponsor is industrial conglomerate Koc Holding, but it receives 6 per cent of its funding from the ministry of culture and maintains cordial relations with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government. Asked whether the Biennial would show work about, for example, the situation of Turkey's Kurdish population, IKS's general director Gorgun Taner admitted that it would be "a problem" but that the organisers would not prevent it.

They are unlikely to run into trouble with *The Seventh Continent*, as this Biennial is titled. A reference to the island of plastic waste, five times the size of Turkey, in the Pacific Ocean, the show is curated by Nicolas Bourriaud, who describes the refuse as the “ultimate symbol of the Anthropocene era”.

Bourriaud presents his artists — 56 across three venues — as an elite squadron of eco-warriors who “stand apart” and “show us what we have created, unaware.”

In truth, we don’t need artists to waken us to our imperilled planet. Art can play a role, of course, but it may not always be positive. As a growing number of institutions take steps to reduce their carbon footprint, it’s surely indisputable that contemporary art’s nonstop international merry-go-round contributes to the problem.

Yet Bourriaud was dismissive when asked if his Biennial justified the fuel emissions of hundreds of thousands of visitors and participants. “Guilt is not the answer...” he declared. “The problem is mass tourism. It’s not visitors to the Istanbul Biennial that are going to change the situation.”



'The Tipping Hall' by Eloise Hawser (2019) © Sahir Ugur Eren

Certainly, art can enrich the big picture with surprise, nuance and imagination often missing in science, activism and reportage. In Istanbul, a number of pieces achieve this aim. In main venue Antrepo 5, a multistorey edifice close to the waterfront, “The Tipping Hall”, an installation by Eloise Hawser, includes a video of a mechanical claw scooping up plastic from a gigantic pile. Lying in a Turkish recycling facility, the shiny mountain appears precious and mysterious, in the throes of redemptive transformation. Also at Antrepo, “Ungrounding Land”, a film by En-Man Chang, catapults us into the moment when a precarious community in Taiwan watches as its makeshift, decades-old neighbourhood is demolished to make way for a new development.

That these films are so different — one near abstract, the other plugged into human experience — suggests that there are few boundaries on what moves us. Yet in their work’s specificity of time and place, they share common ground with much successful art here.

That local pulse was at its most reverent in Hale Tenger’s work “Appearance”. Set in the grounds of a ramshackle palace and orchard on Buyukada, a leafy, traffic-free island haven that acts as a retreat for Istanbul residents and is currently home to six Biennial installations, the soundtrack of Tenger’s melancholy poem is installed so cleverly it seems that one stately fruit tree in particular is whispering its own elegy.



'Appearance' by Hale Tenger (2019) © Sahir Ugur Eren

Over at the third venue, Pera Museum, the standout works came from Charles Avery and Norman Daly, both of whom have elaborated fictional realms. Avery’s “The Island”, evokes a close-knit seafaring society where fishermen and philosophers are interchangeable. Daly’s universe meanwhile, which he began to create in the 1960s, is laid out like a museum and chronicles the lost civilisation of Llhuros through esoteric relics such as the “Votive of a Stilt Walker”.

These fantasy territories, one fragile, the other extinct, are realised with painstaking mental and manual attention — Avery’s drawings are standalone gems; Daly’s faux-ancient remnants in

metal and stone are astoundingly convincing. Leaving aside their ecological undercurrents, the work's material presence acts as an emotional clarion call for preservation.



'Untitled (Fisherman returning from the memory of consciousness)' by Charles Avery (2016) © GRIMM

Sadly, these subtle expressions are eclipsed by the excess of eco-focused work. Aside from the volume of pieces on a single subject, too many artists forget that they are neither scientists, nor anthropologists, nor journalists. Instead, they throw in a little of all these pursuits — a bewildering film here, a jargon-heavy text there — and the results exhaust rather than enlighten.

Matters have not been helped by the Biennial's last-minute change of location. Originally planned for Istanbul's historic Haliç shipyards, the discovery of asbestos a month before the opening meant that more than 35 artists shifted to Antrepo 5. But this austere building, destined to open as the Istanbul Painting and Sculpture Museum in 2020, and mostly divided into featureless galleries, intensifies the thematic monotony.

No one could accuse Arter of such a flaw. A subsidiary of the Vehbi Koc foundation (allied to the same family as the Biennial's Koc Holding), Arter has been designed by London-based Grimshaw Architects to cover six floors and 18,000 sq metres of internal space, 4,000 of which is dedicated to exhibitions. With varied galleries connected by wide staircases and glass walls, it's a fluid environment that feels entwined with its local district, Dolapdere, where migrant communities have found a home. In acknowledgment of the latter, Arter's terrace is home to "Mystic Transport", an installation of satin quilts on metal trolleys by Gulsun Karamustafa.



'Mystic Transport' by Gulsun Karamustafa (1992)

Her work is one of few to confront Turkey's political realities directly. Many other artists instead recycle vintage imagery and narratives to obliquely gesture at contemporary crises. This is most noticeable in *What Time Is It?*, a group show — one of seven in the opening programme — on the top floor. Heart-quickenng, for example, is Jonas Mekas's 2012 video "Reminiscences of Germany" in which the Lithuanian-American recorded his war diary of forced labour and displacement accompanied by ethereal scenes of town and countryside.

A more pressing menace emanates from Hale Tenger's decrepit wooden guard hut caged by barbed wire. Inside the cabin, a half-drunk glass of tea and kitsch nature photographs tell us that the occupant was, like us, formed by memory and desire. But is he guarding or being guarded? That ambiguity echoes in the title of Tenger's piece "We didn't go outside; we were always on the outside/ We didn't go inside; we were always on the inside" (1995-2015), which sums up the limbo in which Istanbul's cultural custodians now find themselves.



'We didn't go outside; we were always on the outside / We didn't go inside; we were always on the inside' by Hale Tenger (1995-2015) © Baris Aras/Elif Cakirlar

Given the risks, you can only admire the courage of artist Iz Oztat and her gallery Pi Artworks in mounting one of the few shows, *Suspended*, that explicitly confronts the current regime. Riffing on the government's 2018 decision to ban public protest in Istanbul's Galatasaray Square, traditionally a site of public expression, Oztat has created her own version of the square's permanent monument, a 1973 homage to the Turkish Republic. In a video performance co-created with Ann Antidote, Oztat also submits her own trussed body to suspension while a wall sculpture of mute geometries and kinky whip-like objects highlights the fine line between silence as choice or punishment.

Talking to me at her booth at the Contemporary Istanbul fair, where Oztat's work had just been sold to the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, Pi Artwork's owner Jade Yesim Turanli admits that *Suspended* was hazardous. "We were scared," she says, adding that luckily a few pro-government visitors "didn't get the point" when they dropped by.

The tale is typical of art's gift for clandestine conversations when official discourse is in lockdown. Such work is breathing life into Turkey's constricted airways. When it comes to the war on global warming, however, the most effective soldiers are elsewhere.

To November 10, bienal.iksv.org

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